Importation or inheritance? Thoughts on the Japanese lexicon

Alexander T. Francis-Ratte
The Ohio State University

1.0 Introduction

A significant number of Old Japanese (OJ) lexical items seem to share similarities with Middle Korean (MK) words in their forms and meanings, e.g.:

(1) a. OJ *pwi* / *po-* 'fire' ~ MK *pul* 'fire'
b. OJ *mwi* / *mu-* 'body' ~ MK *mwom* 'body'

These similarities have been pointed out for over a century, notably by Whitman (1985). However, it is not fully clear why OJ-MK lexical similarities exist. Many have argued that similarities are mostly evidence of the genetic relatedness of Japanese and Korean, with some forms being later borrowings from Korean (Whitman 1985, 2012; Unger 2009). On the other hand, Vovin (2010) has argued that lexical similarities are instead evidence of large-scale borrowing from Korean into Japanese and not evidence of common origin. This paper examines this question first by applying a methodology for distinguishing between cognates and borrowings in potentially related languages, and second by analyzing possible Korean-Japanese contact during the Kofun period (3rd century C.E. to 538 C.E.) and Asuka period (538 C.E. to 710 C.E.). I conclude that OJ-MK lexical matches cannot be explained under Vovin's (2010) theory of borrowing from Korean into Japanese.

2.0 Methodology

When identifying borrowed forms in potentially related languages, there is a risk of mislabeling cognates as borrowings. To distinguish between importation and inheritance, this analysis draws on two observations with theoretical and empirical support: the regularity of sound change, and observations about which forms are most commonly borrowed. The regularity of sound change is the premise that sound change is regular, insofar as it applies across the lexicon in all stipulated environments (Hock & Joseph 1996). The regularity of sound change necessarily entails that two languages, in common descent from the same ancestor, should show regular correspondences in the sounds of cognate forms. Forms that display irregular sound correspondences are less likely to be cognate and more likely to be borrowings. For example, English *path* is close in form and meaning to Sanskrit *pa(n)tha* 'path'. But, this comparison violates the expected Germanic correspondence from Grimm's Law (PIE *p- > Sanskrit *p-*, Germanic *f-), which demonstrates that *path* is not a cognate but rather a borrowing. Thus when comparing potentially related languages, whether the match fits sound correspondences is a primary way of spotting cognates. In addition, because importation occurs when speakers of one language perceive a need or desire for elements of another linguistic system, the most common loanwords in cross-cultural contact are for foreign or culturally-specific material (Winford 2003). Words for non-native material are prime candidates for borrowing in contact situations; greater lexical transfer entails more intensive contact.

3.0 Lexical Comparison

To test whether OJ-MK lexical similarities are due to inheritance or importation, I set up two competing hypotheses, each with expectations. Hypothesis #1 (importation, no inheritance)

states that all OJ-MK lexical similarities are borrowings from Korean into Japanese or chance resemblances. Hypothesis #1 predicts no systematic sound correspondences between OJ and MK, and no systematic difference between culturally specific and non-specific vocabulary. Hypothesis #2 (inheritance, some importation) states that Japanese and Korean are related languages that share a great deal of cognate vocabulary, with a limited number of later borrowings from Korean into Japanese. Hypothesis #2 predicts that Japanese morphemes of all lexical subtypes should show regular correspondences in sound to Korean morphemes; later borrowings should be distinct from cognates by the absence of regular sound correspondences and by their (non-native) semantic referents.

(2) Category A: Phonologically regular correspondences
   a. OJ *ko* 'this (proximal)' ~ MK *ku* 'that (mesial)'
   b. OJ *koso* 'indeed' ~ MK *kus* 'indeed'
   c. OJ *tor-* 'takes' ~ MK *tul-* 'takes, raises'
   d. OJ *moro* 'all, both' ~ MK *mulus* 'all, in general'
   e. OJ *pito* 'one' ~ MK *pilus* 'first'
   f. OJ *poye-* 'howls' ~ MK *pullu-* 'calls out'
   g. OJ *pwi* / *po-* 'fire' ~ MK *pul* 'fire'
   h. OJ *kwi* / *ko-* 'tree' ~ MK *kuluh* 'stump'
   i. OJ *koko-* 'great' ~ MK *khu-* 'great' < **huku-*

Category A matches all display the same regular correspondence of OJ *o* ~ MK *u*, that is, between the central vowels OJ /ə/ ~ MK /ɨ/, and this correspondence holds across grammatical categories. Furthermore, Category A matches do not display cultural specificity in their semantics. Category A comparisons could be borrowings, but the regularity of the correspondence supports these matches being potential cognates.

(3) Category B: Phonologically irregular correspondences
   a. OJ *kusiro* '(bracelet)' ~ MK *kwusul* 'jewel'
   b. OJ *kisi* '(foreign, Sillan) lord' ~ MK *k(u)wisil* 'government post'
   c. OJ *kisaragi* 'second month' ~ MK *kyezulh* 'winter'
   d. OJ *kimi* 'lord' ~ MK *nim-kum* 'lord'
   e. EMJ *asaborake* 'dawn' ~ MK *polk-* 'red, bright'
   f. OJ *yorokob-* 'rejoices' ~ MK *culkeW-* 'joyous'

Category B matches differ in every relevant way from Category A matches. Category B matches violate the sound correspondence of OJ *o* ~ MK *u* shown above, instead showing a limited correspondence of OJ *i* ~ MK *u* found only in these comparisons. Furthermore, matches (3a-c) show the semantic hallmarks of borrowing: (3a) *kusiro* refers to imported material culture; (3b) *kisi* refers to a Korean political title; and (3c) *kisaragi* refers to the lunar calendar, intellectual technology from the continent. (3d) *kimi* is non-specific but nevertheless violates the expected correspondence of MK *u*. For (3e), *asa-borake* shows an irregular correspondence of *-rake* to MK *-lk*, but more importantly the Korean form has a probable internal structure (*pulk-* < **pul-k-* 'fire+ADJ') that the Japanese form does not. For (3f) also, MK *culkeW-* has internal structure (cf. *culki-* 'enjoys it') that OJ *yorokob-* does not, which shows that the forms are unlikely to be cognate. Thus we have strong arguments for labeling each of these lexical comparisons as

borrowings and not cognates. Crucially, differences between Categories A and B show a clear bifurcation of Korean-Japanese lexical matches.

4.0 Possible Contact

It is often taken for granted that the right social conditions for linguistic influence from Korean once existed in Japan, and this assumption has provided a foundation for convergence theories. However, this assumption needs to be challenged. The first possible period of Japanese contact with continental people is in the Kofun period (ca. 3rd century C.E. to 538 C.E.). This period is marked by a noticeable change in Japanese material culture, which archaeologists have long thought was triggered by the introduction and adoption of continental practices, specifically the building of Tumuli as tombs for nobility (Ledyard, 1975). As Unger (2009: 25) points out though, the practice of building Tumuli associated with the Kofun period diffused too gradually to be associated with a single historical event such as an invasion. I am inclined to agree with Unger that likely candidates for the bearers of Kofun culture are hypothetical 'para-Japanese,' pre-Japanese people who did not leave southern Korea during the Yayoi Migrations. These people would not only have possessed peninsular technology, they would have been natural allies for the Japanese, speaking a similar language that facilitated cultural transfer. At best, the Kofun period does not provide direct support for the idea that Korean was imposed on the Japanese populace, and at worst, the most plausible explanation militates against contact with Korean speakers.

A second possible period of contact is in the Asuka period (538 C.E. to 710 C.E.), when refugees from the Korean kingdoms of Paekche and Koguryo fled to Japan. In order for Vovin's thesis to be correct, speakers of Japanese in the capital area would need to have become Korean-Japanese bilinguals whose familiarity with both systems enabled the importation of features from one language to the other, e.g. the OJ 'locative genitive' morpheme *-tu* which Vovin (2010: 53) claims is borrowed from the Korean genitive *-s*. But as Unger (2009: 16) points out, there is "no compelling historical evidence that Korean and Japanese stood on equal sociolinguistic footing for a sustained period of time". Indeed, immigrant families took on surnames like *Hata* (OJ *pata* 'loom') and *Aya* (OJ *aya* 'pattern'), which suggests bilingualism in immigrant families seeking to assimilate to Japanese rather than in the general population (Unger, 2009: 148-149). Textual evidence from OJ does not favorably portray the language of Korea either; e.g. in *Manyoshu* 199[1] we read *koto sapeku Kudara no para yu* 'from the chattering plains of Paekche,' which likens Paekchean language to unintelligible noise. It is hard to believe that these words could have been written by an educated speaker of Old Japanese if Old Korean had been a prestige language of the capital mere decades prior. In sum, I do not find support for Vovin's (2010) theory that contact with Koreans in the Kofun or Asuka periods produced all or most of the OJ-MK typological and lexical similarities.

5.0 Discussion

I observe a bifurcation of Korean-Japanese lexical matches into two categories. Under the methodology established in Section 2.0, I conclude that Category A matches fit all of the criteria for being cognates, whereas Category B matches fit all of the criteria for being borrowings from Korean into Japanese. This bifurcation of lexical matches into two neat categories is extremely problematic for Hypothesis #1 (importation, no inheritance), under which we expect no systematic distinction between 'inherited' and 'imported' morphemes. Vovin's (2010) theory

[1] A lament for Prince Takechi (died 696 C.E.), placing the poem's context squarely in the Asuka Period.

that lexical matches are due to extensive borrowing fails to explain the data presented in this paper. Instead, a bifurcation of lexical matches into Category A (cognate) and Category B (borrowing) is precisely what we predict under Hypothesis #2 (inheritance, some importation). In other words, the theory of Korean-Japanese common origin elegantly explains the data presented in this paper. Some Old Japanese words are borrowings out of Korean. However, as this paper has shown, such borrowings display all of the hallmarks of importation and differ clearly from the majority of cognates. This paper has not set out to definitively prove that Korean and Japanese are related languages, and reconstructing their common ancestor requires an altogether different approach. However, what this paper does is demonstrate that only a theory of Korean-Japanese genetic relationship can currently explain the patterning of lexical matches. Therefore, we should reject Vovin's (2010) theory of mass importation as an inference to the best possible explanation.

References

Hock, H.H. & B. Joseph. (1996) *Language history, language change, and language relationship: An introduction to historical and comparative linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Ledyard, G. (1975) Galloping along with the Horseriders: Looking for the Founders of Japan. *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1.2. 217-254.

Unger, J. M. (2009) *The Role of Contact in the Origins of the Japanese and Korean Languages*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Vovin, A. (2010) *Koreo-Japonica: A re-evaluation of a common genetic origin*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Whitman, J. B. (1985) *The phonological basis for the comparison of Japanese and Korean*. Harvard University doctoral dissertation.

Whitman, J. B. (2012) The Relationship of Japanese and Korean. In N. Tranter (ed.), *The languages of Japan and Korea*. 24-38. London: Routledge.

Winford, D. (2003) *An Introduction to Contact Linguistics.* Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing.